

TRAINING MODULE 1

STUDY PLAN

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA): History and Organization

Objective:

To learn basic facts about VA, its history and its organization.

References:

Title 38, U.S. Code.

38 Code of Federal Regulations.

Adjudication Manual M21-1, Part I

VA Pamphlet 21-00-1, *A Summary of VA Benefits*.

VA Pamphlet 80-06-01, *Federal Benefits for Veterans and Dependents*.

VA Pamphlet 80-97-2, *VA History in Brief*.

VA Booklet: *The Veterans Benefits Administration: an Organizational History: 1776–1994*.

Instructions:

Study the assigned reference materials for an idea of the scope and extent of the activities and responsibilities of the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Summary:

THE UNITED STATES HAS THE MOST COMPREHENSIVE SYSTEM OF VETERANS' benefits and care of any nation in the world. The concept of special benefits for veterans of (military) service dates back to antiquity, and veterans' benefits in this country date from the earliest Colonial days—the Plymouth colony in 1636 provided money to those disabled in the colony's defense against the Indians; other colonies soon followed suit with their own veterans' laws.

At the beginning of the War for Independence in 1775, the Continental Congress passed the first national veterans' pension law, which granted half-pay for life for loss of a limb or other "serious" disability, as a recruiting tool for the Continental Army. Unfortunately, there was no money to fund the program, and its actual implementation was left up to the individual states. With the end of the war and the subsequent ratification of the U.S. Constitution, the first

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Congress assumed responsibility for paying veterans' benefits. The first Federal veterans' law was passed in 1789; it continued the pension law previously passed by the Continental Congress.

Initially, no clear distinctions were made between compensation, service pensions, pensions for needy, aged, or disabled veterans, and pensions based on disabilities arising from military service. The terms "compensation" and "pension" were used more or less interchangeably. Different pension programs, with different eligibility requirements, were enacted for veterans of each of the wars the United States fought during the first half of the nineteenth century. Benefits for the surviving widows and orphans of wartime veterans were first authorized about 1806.

Benefits for Civil War veterans were restricted to those veterans who had fought on the Union side; Confederate soldiers were not legally recognized as "veterans" until 1958. After the Civil War, there were no new pension programs for a number of years; specifically, there were no new benefits programs for veterans of the Spanish-American War or the Philippine Insurrection. In 1912, the Sherwood Act granted an automatic pension at age 62 to all veterans, including Mexican War and (Union) Civil War veterans.

Veterans' homes for medical care were first established in 1812 with the Naval Home in Philadelphia, followed by the Soldiers' Home and St. Elizabeth's Hospital, both in Washington, DC, in 1853 and 1855, respectively. In 1866 Congress established the National Homes for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers, which initially provided mostly domiciliary services, plus incidental medical care, for disabled and indigent (Union) veterans. The quality of medical care available at these homes gradually rose until it was comparable to the level of hospital care of the day. The National Cemetery System was established in 1862, to provide burial for the Union war dead. In 1873 the scope of the National Cemetery System was enlarged to provide for burial for all honorably discharged (Union) veterans.

Prior to 1930 the responsibility for and administration of the various veterans' programs was fragmented, and spread among several different agencies. Initially, veterans' monetary benefits (pensions) were briefly administered by the Federal courts, but this quickly proved to be unsatisfactory and the responsibility for administering these benefits was assigned to the War Department. In 1833 the War Department established a Bureau of Pensions to administer the veterans' pension programs; this was the first administrative unit dedicated solely to veterans' benefits. At different times this Bureau of Pensions was variously under the jurisdiction of the War Department, the Navy Department, the Treasury Department, and the Interior Department.

In 1914 a Bureau of War Risk Insurance was established under the Treasury Department, to insure American ships and cargoes against the hazards of carrying war materials to the Allies. When the United States formally entered World War I in 1917, the Bureau of War Risk Insurance was assigned the additional tasks of providing life insurance for American troops and administering veterans' and survivors' benefits after the war. In 1918 a Federal Board for Vocational Education was established as an independent agency to provide vocational rehabilitation for disabled World War I veterans, based on eligibility as determined by the Bureau of War Risk Insurance. The Public Health Service was charged with responsibility for providing medical care for World War I veterans.

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In 1921 the Veterans Bureau was established as an independent agency to consolidate all benefits for World War I veterans (life insurance, disability and death compensation, vocational rehabilitation, medical care) under one agency. The Bureau of Pensions and the National Homes for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers continued to separately exist, to handle benefits and care for veterans of previous wars and their survivors.

The Veterans Administration (VA) was established in 1930, merging the Veterans Bureau, the Bureau of Pensions, and the National Homes for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers, and finally bringing all veterans' benefits programs under the jurisdiction of a single agency (except for the National Cemetery System, which remained under the jurisdiction of the War Department).

In 1933 President Franklin Roosevelt used his emergency authority under the Economy Act of 1933 for dealing with the Great Depression to eliminate virtually all veterans' pensions except for permanent and total ratings for disabilities related to service. When this authority expired in 1935, Congress quickly re-passed most (but not all) of the veterans' laws that were previously in effect.

On June 12, 1944, President Roosevelt signed into law Public Law 346, the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, also known as the GI Bill of Rights. Among other things, this law guaranteed returning World War II veterans one year's worth of unemployment compensation upon discharge from service; financial assistance with education or training programs, to include payment of tuition and a monthly subsistence allowance; and no-down-payment, low-interest guaranteed loans for purchase of a home. As a result, following World War II the Veterans Administration grew to become the largest non-Cabinet agency in the Federal Government. In 1973, the Army transferred control of the National Cemetery System to VA, except for Arlington National Cemetery and the Soldiers' Home National Cemetery.

On March 15, 1989, the Veterans Administration finally became a Cabinet-level agency, changing its name to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. The Administrator of Veterans Affairs became the Secretary of Veterans Affairs. The new agency was composed of three primary subagencies, each headed by an Undersecretary: the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA); the Veterans Health Administration (VHA); and the National Cemetery Administration; plus a number of associated and subsidiary offices, Boards, and Secretariats, including the Board of Veterans' Appeals, the Board of Contract Appeals, the Veterans' Canteen Service, the Office of General Counsel, and the Office of the Inspector General. The Department of Veterans Affairs is the second-largest agency in the Federal Government, second in size only to the Department of Defense.

VBA administers all of the non-medical benefits programs for veterans, dependents and survivors: the compensation and pension programs; vocational rehabilitation for disabled veterans; various education and training assistance programs for veterans, dependents and survivors; loan guaranty programs for veterans and eligible surviving spouses; and a number of life insurance programs for veterans. VBA also provides a burial allowance for eligible veterans. VBA has three Regional Offices in California: Oakland, Los Angeles, and San Diego.

VHA provides health care facilities for veterans, and in some cases their dependents or survivors. It is one of the largest health care delivery systems in the world. Nationwide, VA operates more than 170 medical centers, more than 80% of which are affiliated with an university school of medicine. VHA averages nearly 100,000 inpatients per day. In addition, VHA operates numerous

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outpatient clinics, readjustment counseling centers, domiciliaries, and nursing homes. In California there are eight VA Medical Centers (some of which encompass more than one hospital), more than twenty-five Outpatient Clinics, twenty-one Vet Centers, ten Nursing Home Care Units, and two domiciliaries, located at the VA Medical Centers in Palo Alto and West Los Angeles.

The National Cemetery Administration operates National Cemeteries throughout the United States and its territories. There are seven National Cemeteries in California, of which three (Riverside National Cemetery, Sacramento Valley VA National Cemetery, and San Joaquin Valley National Cemetery) are presently accepting new interments. The Sacramento Valley VA National Cemetery began burial operations on October 16, 2006. The other National Cemeteries in California are only accepting burials of family members of persons already interred, although Fort Rosecrans National Cemetery (near San Diego) still offers burial of cremated remains. In addition, the initial planning stages of another new National Cemetery near Bakersfield are nearing completion, and construction is planned for completion sometime in 2010.

Persons eligible for burial in a National Cemetery include veterans; service members who die on active duty; certain Reservists and National Guard members; World War II Merchant Mariners; U.S. citizens who served honorably in the armed forces of an Allied government during a war; and such other persons or classes of persons as may be designated by either the Secretary of Veterans Affairs or the Secretary of the Air Force. The spouse or unremarried surviving spouse and the children (as defined) of eligible persons are also eligible for burial in a National Cemetery.

— Notes —

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Study Questions:

Using the assigned references and reading materials, answer the following questions:

1. What year did the Veterans Administration become an independent Federal agency?
2. VA has always been a Cabinet-level agency, since its inception. (T/F)
3. How many subagencies are there in the current Department of Veterans Affairs?
4. List the different subagencies within the Department of Veterans Affairs:
 - a. _____
 - b. _____
 - c. _____
5. How many medical centers does the Department of Veterans Affairs operate in California?
6. All of the National Cemeteries located in California are currently active. (T/F)
7. Are non-veterans eligible for burial in a National Cemetery? (Y/N)
8. The Secretary of Defense has authority to decide if a person may be buried in a National Cemetery. (T/F)
9. Which VA Medical Centers in California include a domiciliary?

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